

Nevada's 101-year-old treasure in Wingfield Springs

A World War II veteran, retired physician and tireless neighbor, Tony Pagano carries more than a century of history - and still moves through life with remarkable energy.

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Tony Pagano (right) and Pat Hickey pictured together in August. The 101-year-old veteran and retired OB-GYN remains active in Wingfield Springs.

"You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man," advises the Old Testament's Leviticus when honoring our elders.

The problem with doing so to 101-year-old Nevadan Tony Pagano, a World War II veteran of Battle of the Bulge fame, is that you have to catch him first in order to stand and salute the retired medical doctor who walks faster than most people half his age, still drives his own car and spends most of his days in Wingfield Springs helping others.

The Italian-American Bronze Star winner recently returned to Normandy for the 80th D-Day memorial in France. Pagano said that even after the anniversary event was over, he could "never forget" the 12 friends he lost and the 50 who were wounded, many of them by his side in battle.

Tony became a medical doctor after the war, "in part because of the memories of the wounded and dead from WWII. I mourn my 12 friends who were killed, every day of my life." Pagano honors their sacrifice by the life he continues to live, along with his few remaining fellow Americans rightly called "The Greatest Generation."

Healthy and energetic

I first met Tony Pagano last weekend at the annual Honor Flight ceremony at the Atlantis. Organizers of the gala luncheon were waiting anxiously for Tony to arrive before beginning the program. He's always a featured presenter and has no need of assistance as he bounds up the stairs and onto the stage to speak to his fellow vets from the many wars the U.S. has waged over the past 86 years.

Spending a day with the retired OBGYN physician at his Sparks retirement home in the sprawling ranching community once owned by the powerful George Wingfield, known as the "King of Nevada," Tony himself feels like royalty.

I joined him and a 90-year-old friend for lunch in the facility's dining room, where seasoned citizens 20 years younger appear in awe of his boundless energy and good cheer. Before our liver-and-onions lunch - he doesn't eat the potatoes or gravy - Tony introduced me to his female dance partner, who joins him on Friday nights to cut a wide swath on the dance floor with energy and flair rarely seen in a man his age.

NEVADA'S 101-YEAR-OLD TREASURE

The retired physician has maintained the same body weight as the day he was discharged from the Army in 1945. Spending time with this amazing American, who came to Nevada to be near two of his four children, I couldn't help but feel I was in the presence of an extraordinary human being, almost mythical in nature.

Almost a Forrest Gump-like figure

Being present at many of the historical moments we only read about from the previous century, Tony Pagano is a Forrest Gump-like figure - an ordinary, unassuming person who found himself at the scene of numerous monumental events.

Eventually landing on Omaha Beach at Normandy on a troop transport to fight in the Battle of the Bulge under Gen. Patton, Tony later made it to Salerno, Italy, where his paternal grandparents had been held hostage by Germans. Tony's unit was then assigned to help liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp, where he saw lampshades made of tattooed skin, only to then be transferred to Nuremberg, Germany, where Nazi leaders were on trial for war crimes.

Returning to his home in the U.S. on a passenger liner with 10,000 other soldiers in 1946, Tony says, "Returning to New York was so special. It was so thrilling to see the Statue of Liberty, where my ancestors from Sicily had passed by, and I was now returning home to."

French moralist Joseph Joubert said it best: "Life is a country that the old have seen, and lived in. Those who have to travel through it can only learn the way from them."

Tony has a lot to teach us on that journey. After all, wisdom is knowledge that has been tested and reflected on. Tony Pagano's 100-plus years produced both.

Poetry and pain

The path to Pagano's medical career was paved by "soldiering in WWII, seeing both Americans and enemy wounded and dead, led me toward the study of medicine." Like many, Tony speaks of the survivor's guilt that has led many veterans to commit suicide.

Medics especially have proportionally high casualty and mortality rates in war because they leave cover and expose themselves to active fire in order to reach wounded soldiers. Tony saw medics time and time again being wounded, and sometimes dying, while saving their fellow combatants. The memory of their mission and their mercy remained with him when he pondered what to do with himself when he returned home from war.

There was also someone else from earlier in his life who convinced him that the practice of medicine was the best way to pay forward a life that had been spared, and also blessed.

Tony penned a poem about a teenage Irish girl who gave him his first kiss. Entitled "Her Lips," he met her again back home on a soldier's three-day pass before sailing to Normandy. He later understood she was there dying of rheumatic heart disease:

"Her lips were a strange blue. Those lips that gave me my first exciting adolescent kiss. I did not know it then that I would not see her again. She sat up in bed with many pillows, saying she was happy to see me. Her name was Eleanor Melee. When we first kissed, her lips were always red."

So were the wounds red of the many soldiers and friends who died around him during the war that he can't forget. To honor them, and Eleanor Melee, Tony became a doctor and eventually an OB-GYN, "delivering over 2,000 babies into the world" over the span of his medical career.

The wisdom of age

At 101 years on this planet, Tony Pagano has produced wisdom earned by a lifetime of service to others. Sitting in his apartment, I notice a stack of newspapers he collects from other residents before delivering them to the veterans' home, where men and women there can read the obituaries of their passed-away friends.